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THE PROBLEM OF GRADUATE TRAINING IN PERSONNEL ADMINISTRATION

OUTLINE¹

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1. *Assumptions.*—Any discussion of instruction in personnel administration must rest on certain assumptions. Those upon which the present paper rests are:

a) The training is being given to fit people for an administrative post in some organization.

b) There has been in that organization a reasonably clear analysis and separation of administrative functions.

c) In the major executive group the function of personnel administration is distinguished and placed in charge of one of the major executives who eventually, it is to be hoped, would have the kind of training here considered, and would be able to devote as large a part of his time to this work as its importance merits.

¹The subject of field work is omitted, since it is being extensively treated in another paper.

d) This training is given as a graduate course for which a college degree is virtually a prerequisite.

e) The training is being given in a field where a certain body (however small) of principles and methods has been scientifically established and it is recognized that advance can be made in giving definite content to the field only as a scientific and professional spirit is allowed to dominate.

In these assumptions the emphasis is upon the ideas that we are aiming to train responsible business executives; that nothing less than graduate-school work is required to provide the right kind of training; and that the training should be given in such a way as to establish personnel administration on a professional footing. If I make no effort to defend or explain these assumptions further it is because I think I may safely further assume that they are very nearly axiomatic today to the members of the Association of Collegiate Schools of Business.

Courses in personnel work are today divisible into three main types: (a) those calculated to inform the student who is majoring in some other field of administration as to the nature and methods of this field; (b) those calculated to provide vocational training in this as a major field of work; (c) short-unit, intensive courses which aim to afford a new stimulus to executives already at work. It is with the second of these types that the present discussion deals, not because the others are less important, but because they present special problems of their own.

There is already a variety of courses in personnel administration of this vocational type. At a valuable conference of teachers of this subject from twelve eastern universities who came together in March of this year, it was found that the courses of training varied from one semester to two years in length; that in some cases Seniors in college qualify for the first year of the graduate school and in some cases a college degree "or its equivalent" is a prerequisite for commencing the work.

It was agreed, however, by this group of teachers that a two-year curriculum offered none too long a time in which to cover the field. It may indeed be taken as the desirable next step toward setting certain minimum standards for instruction in the

personnel field that it be built around the idea of a *two-year graduate training period*.

2. *Selection of teachers.*—The next prerequisite to the setting of proper standards is to assure a teaching force, especially in personnel work itself, but also in the most important supplementary courses, which has some first-hand experience with the conduct of industry. The teacher must be able to convey a sense of the reality of the concrete situation with which the student will presently be confronted. I know of no way adequately to convey this sense short of having been in industry in some capacity for a long enough time to have absorbed it.

Moreover, in order to keep fresh his own knowledge of concrete problems and of progress in adopting new procedures, the teacher must be constantly in the closest touch with factories, stores, office organizations, and industries as a whole. Some of the ways of assuring this contact would be naturally developed in forwarding the right kind of field work.

With this practical experience the teacher of personnel should combine an adequate academic equipment in industrial history, economics, sociology, biology, anthropology, psychology, industrial organization, and statistics.

And as important as any requirement is his ability to kindle the enthusiasm of his students and insure their devotion to scientific habits of work and a professional attitude toward their chosen calling. This means that the teacher is to be not alone a technician and a specialist, but a human being of sufficiently balanced interests to know and to make his students realize and hold in proper relation the truths that life is something more than the supplying of economic wants, but that nevertheless the conduct of our economic life comprises one of the most absorbing and fascinating fields for intellectual mastery and imaginative, creative effort.

No thought is more appalling in connection with the development of personnel work than that its teaching might some day fall into the hands of the routineer or the conventional college professor of economics equipped only with the erudition which his possession of a Ph.D. betokens. It will be far better, if the properly equipped teachers are not available, that these courses be postponed until

they are. The beginning of wisdom here is to get the right faculty; only with that will there be added unto us many of the other desiderata which are otherwise unobtainable.

3. *Selection of students.*—As the factor of “personality” is so determining in the success of the personnel executive on the job, selection of students should only take place on the basis of a personal interview. Only so is the teacher able to get a reasonably fair impression of the applicant. Two interviews a few days apart are worth much more than twice one interview. Two interviews ought indeed to be made standard practice in selecting students. All of which leads to the conclusion that the department of the graduate school which gives this course should be given virtually complete authority as to admissions to the department.

If we may assume that all applicants are college graduates, the basis of further selection is admittedly difficult. Where the curriculum is set up on a two-year basis and the first year supplies the more general courses, a natural process of elimination takes place before the vocational course of the second year is entered upon. This arrangement has much to commend it and is the one we are trying out at the New York School of Social Work with promise of success. It means that students may in the first year get a speaking acquaintance with several branches of work and find something that appeals more than personnel. One is tempted to repeat to prospective personnel students the advice formerly given to prospective clergymen: “Unless you are sure you would be miserable if you did not go into this work, keep out of it.”

Especially does industrial work itself offer a helpful aid in the selective process. If we could get more college Juniors and Seniors to put on their overalls and work at the bench for eight or ten weeks for two summers, their decisions would be much more enlightened, and the teacher's task would be so much simplified. Indeed, as between the student who comes directly from college and one who has one or more years out in industry or other actual work, the balance of favor would usually be with the second applicant. Good standing in college work is indicative but not conclusive; of almost equal significance is the applicant's standing

in the so-called "outside activities"—the question being: How well did he get on with his fellows? Good health is indispensable.

Another necessary basis of judgment is the extent to which the student has covered some of the indispensable background material in college. The undergraduate who wants to jump from a major in Latin to personnel may be doing the right thing; but other things being equal the student who majored in the social sciences has the presumptions in his favor.

Preferably some care should be exercised to get an equal proportion of men and women in the same class (assuming coeducational conditions). This gives better results in class discussion and it is also true that if students are being prepared with any eye to the market for their services, the proportion of women should not be too high.

This question of wise selection of students involves, finally, the question of scholarships. Many students who should get this training and would profit most by it are unable to afford the additional indebtedness which continuing study after college would almost inevitably mean to them. It is as yet by no means an established truth that this type of student can earn enough during the course to pay his way through. Conceivably they might take a couple of years between college and graduate training to earn the necessary funds, and there is something to be said for this from the point of view of a broadened experience as the basis of specialized training. But the mortality would be very high; many would never return for further training. Nor can this difficulty be satisfactorily met by a liberal-loan policy to students. Personally I oppose asking students to involve themselves in a one- or two-thousand-dollar debt which hangs over their heads for the first five years in industry, delays marriage, and causes annoying anxiety.

A necessary adjunct to the equipment of the graduate business school is therefore a generous scholarship fund. Without this only the rich man's son will take this course and the school will become the very thing we must zealously strive to avoid, namely, a class institution.

4. *Content of the major course.*—I am assuming that the “major” course on personnel administration is being given three or four hours a week throughout the second graduate year. I am myself at present using two two-hour sessions a week with great satisfaction; and it is understood that for every hour spent in class two are spent in assigned reading. This means twelve hours a week at least on the major course.

Another possible arrangement is to have a rather general introductory course in personnel procedure in the first year for all business students whether they contemplate going into banking, insurance, railroads, or industry; and then to follow that in the second year by the vocational course, which is more intensive.

The subject-matter of this second-year course will in certain particulars be modified from school to school in the light of the supplementary courses taken; but it seems to me that most of the questions which might be handled in other courses should be reconsidered here from the special point of view of personnel administration. Take the question of the “open shop,” for example, which may have been considered in certain of its phases in a course on “labor problems” or trade-union history. The question has, however, a wholly different aspect. The question arises: From an administrative point of view (the point of view of shop efficiency, morale, successful types of joint conference of workers and managers), what has the open shop meant? Does experience and a knowledge of human psychology give any hint as to the kind of organized relationship between manual and directive workers in a large corporation which brings the best understanding, the most continuous production, the soundest industrial government? I submit that these are scientific questions of facts about industrial experience and human nature and not simply controversial and passion-provoking questions. And in the same way, I believe that such subjects as collective bargaining, shop committees, and national industrial councils should be treated in this course from this point of view of the developing science of administration. For the field of personnel administration is the field of methods and principles having to do with all the ramifying questions involved in creating an orderly government for industry.

We cannot exclude the "controversial" issues; we must restate them as the scientific questions which they also are.

The conference of personnel teachers already referred to agreed to a marked extent in its outline of the subject-matter of this field. By some it is unfolded in relation to the chronological steps of the entrance of an employee into an organization; by some the subject-matter is arranged on a basis of the administrative divisions of a personnel department. But the several subjects usually treated under the following headings supply the essential content of the course:

- a) Employment procedure
- b) Training procedure
- c) Maintenance of staff
 - 1. Health work
 - 2. Joint relations and adjustments
 - 3. Service (welfare) work
- d) Personnel research
- e) Interdepartmental co-ordination
- f) Community relationships

If anyone doubts that there is a considerable body of actual experience and of discussion of first principles already available to supply the scientific data for this course, he has merely to visit a score of plants which might readily be named as samples and glance through the already formidable bibliographies on these subjects, and he will realize that, although a new science and art, personnel administration is vital and growing.

5. *Necessary supplementary courses.*—In discussing what supplementary courses are necessary, it is impossible to say definitely when they should be worked in, since where undergraduate and graduate work is well dovetailed in the same institution a nice co-ordination can be effected. And even where this is not the case and the graduate school requires students to have had, e.g., elementary psychology and economics, additional courses in those subjects from an only slightly advanced point of view prove invaluable.

Dr. H. S. Person in treating this subject at our March personnel teachers' conference, laid out tentatively a plan of subjects which deserves wider consideration, and I am therefore taking the liberty

of reproducing it here with some minor modifications. He was not answering the question as to *when* these subjects should be taken, but *what* sooner or later should be covered.

He divided the work under three heads, the designations of which are admittedly arbitrary.

- a) Technical, including
 - 1. The major (in this case personnel administration)
 - 2. Technical organization and management of production, job analysis, etc.
 - 3. Corporate and general industrial organization
- b) Historical and social
 - 1. Elementary economics
 - 2. Advanced economics
 - 3. Relation of the state to industry
 - 4. Economic history of the United States
 - 5. History of labor organization
 - 6. Social psychology
 - 7. Ethics (?)
- c) Scientific
 - 1. Physiology
 - 2. Biology
 - 3. Anthropology
 - 4. Psychology
 - 5. Statistics

Dr. Person explained that if he had been discussing the training of general business managers he would only have altered the foregoing scheme by reversing the places now held by personnel administration and technical shop organization, etc. In other words, he insisted that the same general body of equipment should be in the possession of all trained executives with special attention in the second year to their chosen vocation. In this position he was supported by practically all at the conference; and the feeling is certainly general among teachers of personnel that their students must be able to take their place in the organization with a firm grasp upon the detail of production problems and with ability to translate their ideas into terms that "get over" with the production people.

The difficulty frequently found in these supplementary courses is that they are not given from a broad enough point of view. The

subject of psychology is a case in point. It is not that the primary need is for a course in "industrial psychology." But the conventional introspection into psychology is not of great value either. The primary need is a treatment of the subject which gives some positive picture of the human traits and their social significance. The purpose of psychological study for the executive must be to supply a knowledge of human nature in its total interactions and reactions rather than a desiccated analysis of attributes, functions, or faculties, which make it impossible to see the forest for the trees. The same characterization might be made as to the helpful way to offer biology, anthropology, statistics, economics, etc. These sciences have to be presented not in the conventional manner as isolated "subjects," but expositions of dynamic facts having their bearing upon an understanding of contemporary affairs.

6. *The method of teaching.*—Professor Dewey, who is still all too little appreciated as America's greatest educator, has characterized four types of process usually confused with education to the detriment of the conduct and content of educational procedure. He says education is not preparation for a remote future, not unfolding of something within the individual, not molding the individual from outside, not simply a recapitulation of the part for the student's use. It is rather the process of "reconstruction or reorganization of experience which adds to the meaning of experience, and which increases ability to direct the course of subsequent experience."

Without entering into an extended discussion of educational platitudes which are as yet all too infrequently applied, I do urge Professor Dewey's point that in teaching "the essentials of method are identical with the essentials of reflection." The pupil must, to secure these essentials, "have a genuine situation of experience." By which is meant that there must be a continuous activity in which he [the student] is interested for its own sake; secondly, that a genuine problem develop within this situation as a stimulus to thought; third, that he possess the information and make the observations needed to deal with it; fourth, that suggested solutions occur to him which he shall be responsible for developing in an orderly way; fifth, that he have opportunity and occasion to test his ideas by application, to make their meaning clear and to discover for himself their validity.

In that paragraph I believe that Professor Dewey has stated the basic requirements of educational procedure and indicated to what a preponderant extent it is an active, selective, pragmatic, and individual process. If the educator is prepared to agree and to admit that the method of teaching must be the method of reflection, he must be prepared to admit the corollary that the lecture method satisfies only one fragmentary part of the total requirement. It may stimulate, it may present a problem, it may supply information. But it admits of little if any of that active manipulation of ideas in relation to one's own experience which is the heart of the *learning* process. It is not objected that we do not learn anything by being told it. Manifestly we may greatly accelerate the learning process by the effective presentation of new data through lectures if there is no other way to present the data. But the learning process is not complete till the student has made sensible and for him valid use of the data presented. We may learn through the experience of others but not by having it simply told to us. It must be assimilated, related, established in working relation to other currently used working hypotheses, before learning is complete.

One of the definite prerequisites to the taking of the personnel course itself should therefore be some industrial work. Some background of experience in industry on the part of the entire class is an essential. Add to that the required reading, and the class begins to have a common basis in knowledge of actual experiments to discuss and evaluate. It becomes then the duty of the instructor to state the problem, relate it to the rest of the course, suggest sources of evidence, and guide the discussion. The conclusions reached by the student out of this use of his material will have some value to him because he will have made it his own and thought out his own answers. Where there has been industrial experience previously and currently, where documentary material of existing methods has been available before the class, the discus-sional method is surely to be preferred.

I am satisfied that graduate-school teaching as a whole goes on in astonishing disregard of the existence of the printing press. Where there is really fresh material or point of view which the

teacher feels he must himself present either to save time or because it is his own creation, lecturing may become essential. But even under these last conditions we make less use of mimeographed lectures than we might. Why spend valuable class time retailing fact material which the student can better absorb from the printed or typed page?

Personally I see little use for the lecture in the personnel course unless one labors under the handicap of very large classes. All the essential points of a teacher's ideas can be drawn out by the Socratic method and in the process the student's mind has been active, selective, critical, creative, rather than simply absorptive of someone else's ideas. The process of education is not to be confused with that of acquiring information. To be sure, there is much information for the student of personnel to master; but infinitely more important is it that he be able to use his mind, be able resourcefully to meet new problems, be able effectively to state what he thinks and why, be able, in short, to make his past experience available in his immediate situation. These ends are only slightly served by the lecture, and it should be sparingly used.

I hope I shall be pardoned for laboring this presumably commonplace thesis. But I know how much lecturing is still being done, and I am convinced that creative thought is to that extent being stultified among a group of students where independent thinking and courageous self-expression are peculiarly indispensable.

An interesting variant on the discussion method is on trial at the Harvard Business School. The case method is being developed by supplying the students with written accounts of actual or possible procedure and policy as revealed in some particular industrial situation. The student is then asked to discuss the case, its outcome, reasons why he would or would not have handled the situation in a similar manner, etc. It is hoped eventually to build up a body of typical cases covering the entire field of personnel activities and develop the subject by critical comment on these cases. It would seem to me in the absence of a complete trial of this method that if judiciously combined with general discussion of principles and practices based on wider

experience and reading, it should offer an exceedingly provocative manner of instruction.

There should also be, in addition to the class work and industrial experience, the preparation by each student each year of a thesis of four thousand to eight thousand words. The subjects of these papers are less important than the opportunity they offer for original research on some aspect of managerial problems. My own suggestion would be that the thesis of the first year might treat more extensively of some general topic in the field of general management or wider industrial relations and that in the second year the thesis develop more intensively some one phase of personnel-administration technique. Such study as supplementary to the discussional or case method is a valuable way to encourage individual effort and resourcefulness.

7. *Necessary library organization.*—In presupposing easy access to the documentary material in this rapidly expanding field, as a basis for the discussional method of classroom work and individual preparation of theses, I presuppose a type of library service which is all too rarely available.

In the first place, the subject-headings of the ordinary library classification systems have to be expanded to include the terms which are commonplace in the personnel worker's vocabulary. Our teachers' conference appointed a committee to suggest additional subject-headings in order that interested librarians may index books and periodical articles under the accepted designations; and we hope to have such a new subject-heading list in the industrial-relations field available, at least in tentative form, in the near future.

Once the subjects on which this department wants information are understood, it becomes the duty of the librarian to increase his inflow of pamphlet and periodical material to get this new subject-matter. Preferably the personnel course should have a special person on the staff of the business-school (or general college) library, interested primarily in keeping material in this field up to date and in having it quickly accessible for faculty and students. This specially assigned person should, indeed, sit through the personnel course for a year to get the vocabulary. He should

preferably have a sort of seminar room for the personnel literature with filing cabinets for the clipped material and with chairs and tables for study. He should make of his library a real working tool, supplementary and necessary to every student in his thesis and research work. Preferably also two copies of the most used periodicals should be bought so that one of these can be cut up and filed under the subject-headings. I urge this strenuously in the case of at least half a dozen magazines the material from which will never get the use its value merits if it is only card-indexed. For the rest a card-indexing of relevant articles will suffice. A limited amount of newspaper clipping should be done, but in my experience the mounting of such material is usually not necessary. Frequently the newspaper announcements of new procedures are presently superseded by authoritative accounts in pamphlets or other more permanent forms.

The several commercial labor-information digest services should be appealed to either to contribute or sell at a substantial discount their publications for this special library use. There would, I believe, be genuine advertising value to them in having prospective executives familiar with this kind of service. And with a little special thought a mailing-list of organizations which publish in this field can be built up.

Current information including the entire pamphlet-publication output in a variety of fields is indispensable to efficient library service. Scrapbooks of the personnel forms, records, and organization charts of typical corporations should be gradually developed. Catalogues of machine manufacturers should be collected for job-analysis purposes. Constitutions and publications of trade unions and shop committees should be assembled. Annual reports of important corporations should be filed. Company handbooks and house organs should be kept. Enough duplicate copies of the most used books should be available to make it possible for at least 40 per cent of a class to study the same material at the same time. In short, there is a highly specialized service to be rendered here which with the best will in the world the ordinary librarian is untrained to perform. Standard practice in library work contributory to personnel courses should, I believe, include a

specially trained librarian, a special library room, duplicate copies of the management and personnel magazines, and a filing system so carefully defined as to subject-headings that all the current material on every big subject is always at hand. This is by no means an impossible demand—it is indeed an irreducible minimum of equipment.

8. *Placement of graduates.*—There is admittedly not yet a great body of experience to guide us in laying down any general principles regarding placement. In my own experience I find that opportunities in personnel departments tend in a more or less accidental and inadequate way to come to my own attention from time to time. I find that occasionally the establishment which takes on a student for field work wants to keep him permanently. I find that some students go to other parts of the country where they must to a large extent open up their own connections.

There is a great need for a well-organized national agency or network of agencies in the managerial field to which the schools and the corporations could turn with confidence. Dr. Metcalf in his Bureau of Personnel Administration in New York City has opened a placement bureau primarily for personnel workers, but whether he contemplates an organization on a sufficiently large scale to meet the need it is impossible yet to say. Meanwhile, this phase of our problem is not being handled in any systematic way and all of us who teach spend a large amount of time acting as informal placement agencies and the corporations take on personnel workers who in many cases are pitifully unprepared for the work. I confess this is a problem on which I would welcome new light and suggestion, and particularly the founding of a national intercollegiate and industrial managerial placement bureau.

Conclusion.—There is great promise for the scientific, intelligent, and humanly serviceable administration of industry in a greatly extended graduate training of college men and women in schools of business administration. Indeed the opportunity and the demand today outstrips our ability to deliver educational goods of the right quality. The temptation to a too rapid expansion is one we must avoid, for to develop this training without a well-thought-through instructional program, the necessary physical

equipment, and a properly qualified teaching staff, is to open our institutions to attack as promising something which cannot be performed.

The field of personnel administration has, I believe, justified itself not only as one meriting special study but as one where a science is increasingly being developed. But to teach this science-in-the-making requires a peculiarly elaborate scheme of adjuncts—books, current documentary material of all kinds, special librarians, special field-work methods, co-operative relationship with other departments of the university, and a specially trained teaching staff in the major vocational course.

This Association can perform no more timely service than to encourage training in this field, but encouragement at this early stage in development will wisely take the form of discouraging experiments which are not well planned and broadly conceived. Management engineering in its several phases is only beginning to come into its own. The rapidity of its progress depends upon its adherence to a "creed" similar to that already formulated by the Taylor Society. The engineer is there urged to "keep the faith!"

The faith of the community that he will undertake no service inconsistent with the public welfare; and that in service consistent with the public welfare, but in which the interests of groups appear to come in conflict, he will judge carefully and sympathetically the claims of rival interests, and attempt to establish that unity of purpose which promotes the public welfare.

For the executive who is to keep this faith in the difficult industrial days ahead, professional-school training in the science and art of industrial administration is certainly a crucial need.

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